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ARTISTS' DIVISION
(GRADE SIX)

CHAPTER II

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II

POLONAISE

A-FLAT MAJOR

FREDERIC FRANCOIS CHOPIN

Opus 53

This Polonaise was composed when Chopin was thirty-one years of age, and after his return from the Island of Majorca, where he had been suffering from ill health. This illness had seriously lowered his vitality, but there is no trace of such weakness in this Polonaise—it is redolent of the martial and unconquerable spirit of the Polish race.

The origin of the Polonaise is interesting. When the Polish throne became vacant in 1573, an assembly of electors met to decide upon a new sovereign. Henry of Anjou was chosen, and he ascended the throne a year later. At a subsequent ceremony the leading personages and dignitaries of the country were presented to him, in the palace at Cracow, then the capital. There had been suitable music written for the ceremony, to be played as the procession passed by the monarch. The music thus provided was perhaps the first polonaise, a stately march which of course must have been full of pomp and splendor, and no doubt contained many marked national characteristics. However, no one knows what has become of the manuscript of this music. We may be sure nevertheless that it must have been worthy of imitation, for subsequently, after passing through many stages of evolution it has finally resulted in the polonaise as we know it now to be.

It is said that while Chopin was writing this particular Polonaise, he fancied that a band of knights rode through the walls of his room, all in full armor. This, of course, must have been the result of the concentrated attention he had been giving to the work in his zeal to portray such a spirit in the music. The incident made such an impression upon him that he ran from his desk and left the room—and for days did not resume work upon the piece.

The performance of this work calls for much energy and fire, but well controlled balance. In the middle section is all the pomp and circumstance of war. The player must guard against the tendency to display technic at the expense of interpretation. The employment of an excessive *tempo* has caused this work to be styled the "drum polonaise." The *tempo* should vary but little throughout. A somewhat brighter opening, instead of *maestoso,* may be taken—slackening the *tempo* to *maestoso* in the two measures preceding the entry of the Principal Subject (17). The student should be careful to distinguish between the *sixteenth* note in the initial phrase and the *thirty-second* note in the following measure.

The famous Octave passage in the middle section must be made the subject of special technical study. Practise the figure, beginning on each of the four notes in succession, and observe this important fact: that in playing the figure and in returning the hand makes a circular motion to the left. Where the figure changes, beginning on *D*♯ instead of *E* this circular motion reverses turning to the right. The utmost possible elimination of effort and lost motion is necessary for the effective mastery of this passage. The Pedal may be used for each *quarter,* but when the section is repeated an orchestral effect can be produced by holding the Pedal through the entire measure. The last three measures, before the return of the *A-flat* signature, may be played with one Pedal if the performer is able to keep up a steady *crescendo* in the right hand. The section following must be played with much rhythmical assurance.

Chopin's superb mastery of musical form finds notable illustration in the way in which he has introduced the quiet *G major* passage, after all of the previous disturbance. Of almost nocturne-like character, it should be played with much delicacy and color. The *sforzato* Bass notes in the left-hand part, infrequent at first, gradually assert themselves more and more, and seem to presage the return of the martial spirit.

In the next to the last measure of the composition it will be found more effective to disregard the *arpeggio* indications as they stand, and either to play the chords with a simultaneous *arpeggio* in both hands, or better still, play them in the way denoted by the French term *plaqué.* This is a

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rapid, incisive "crushing" of the chord, obtained by setting the fingers for each key and then playing the chord by a quick roll of the whole hand to the right, without moving the fingers.

Great care should be exercised at all times to bring out, with arm weight, the accented tones. It is advisable, in the Coda, slightly to accelerate the *tempo* to heighten the brilliancy and forcefulness of the ending.

As a composer in this dance form—the Polonaise—Chopin excels the composers of all other nations. He has written more and better works in this now commonly accepted style than any of his predecessors, contemporaries, or those who came after him. Probably also this one work is the best of his entire output in the form. The *A major* Polonaise is better known to students because there are few who have not studied and practised it as a part of the regular routine. The military character of the *A major* Polonaise is, however, easily surpassed by the proud, stately and martial character of the one in *A-flat.* The inclusion of the more quiet theme in the middle group, just before the return to the main theme, is often criticized as evidencing a lack of inspiration, or of sympathy with the character of the work. Authorities who take this view of the matter excuse themselves upon the grounds that the composer had lost the thread of the composition after his nocturnal experience with the imaginary knights which had driven him to a temporary abandonment of the Polonaise, assuming that on the resumption of the work the less inspired passages were added. The section referred to is, however, quite a natural dynamic contrast to the outside corners of the Polonaise, and in all dances of this nature the middle group demands quietude, and it is usually found present—no less so in this instance despite the fact that the Trio proper begins somewhat boisterously Here the lessening of the motion in the accompaniment introduction of the florid melodic passages are in keeping with the respect paid to the monarch, and also they may represent the tinseled accoutrements of the military guests as the procession passes in review. It is then appropriate that we consider this division as in no degree lacking in inspiration. Naturally the return to the main theme now contrasts most forcibly with the middle group, a musical necessity which Chopin would scarcely fail to observe. National Polish characteristics are freely in evidence in this Polonaise, but there are also instances wherein the composer has paid his respects to the French. Perhaps these are reminiscent of the Frenchman who came to rule over the Poles during the time the Polonaise had its rise.

The structural form of the piece is quite regular in every respect. The unusual elongation of the middle division, as well as its boisterous beginning, is startling, but otherwise, the themes appear in relation to each other in the manner in which we are accustomed to them.

The student who is interested in critical comment on the works of Chopin and of the Polonaises in particular may refer with satisfaction to Chopin, the Man and His Music, by Huneker. Carrying out the idea suggested in the appellation Héroique, he recalls Ehlert's speaking of it as full of the "ring of damascene blade and silver spur." On this point Mr. Huneker's own characterization is a piece of writing vivid in picture and vigorous in its expresson. He says: "There is imaginative splendor in this thrilling work, with its thunder of horses' hoofs and fierce challenges. What fire, what sword thrusts and smoke and clash of mortal conflict! Here is no psychical presentation but an objective picture of battle, of concrete contours, and with a cleaving brilliancy that excites the blood to boiling pitch. That Chopin ever played it as intended is incredible; none but the heroes of the keyboard may grasp its dense chordal masses, its fiery projectile of tone."

It is not unusual to hear this composition played at too high a speed. "The octaves," says Mr. Huneker, "are spun out as if speed were the sole idea of this episode. Kleczynski advises pianists not to sacrifice the Polonaise to the octaves." According to the testimony of such competent authorities as Joseffy and Von Lenz, Tausig played this Polonaise in a manner not approached by any other pianist.

Liszt wrote a glowing description of the Polonaise of which the following is a short fragment:

> In this form the noblest traditional feelings of ancient Poland are represented. The Polonaise is the true and purest type of Polish national character, as in the course of centuries it was developed, partly through the political disposition of the kingdom toward east and west, partly through an undefinable, peculiar, inborn disposition of the entire race . . . The Polonaises . . . belong to the most beautiful of Chopin inspirations. With their energetic rhythm they electrify, to the point of demonstration, even the sleepiest indifferentism."

Were Chopin alive now that the great war in Europe has liberated his people from the political tyranny of other races, he would feel that his prophecy said to have been written in the tones of his music—"Poland will be free!—has been realized.

POLONAISE

A-FLAT MAJOR

Edited by
Hague Kinsey

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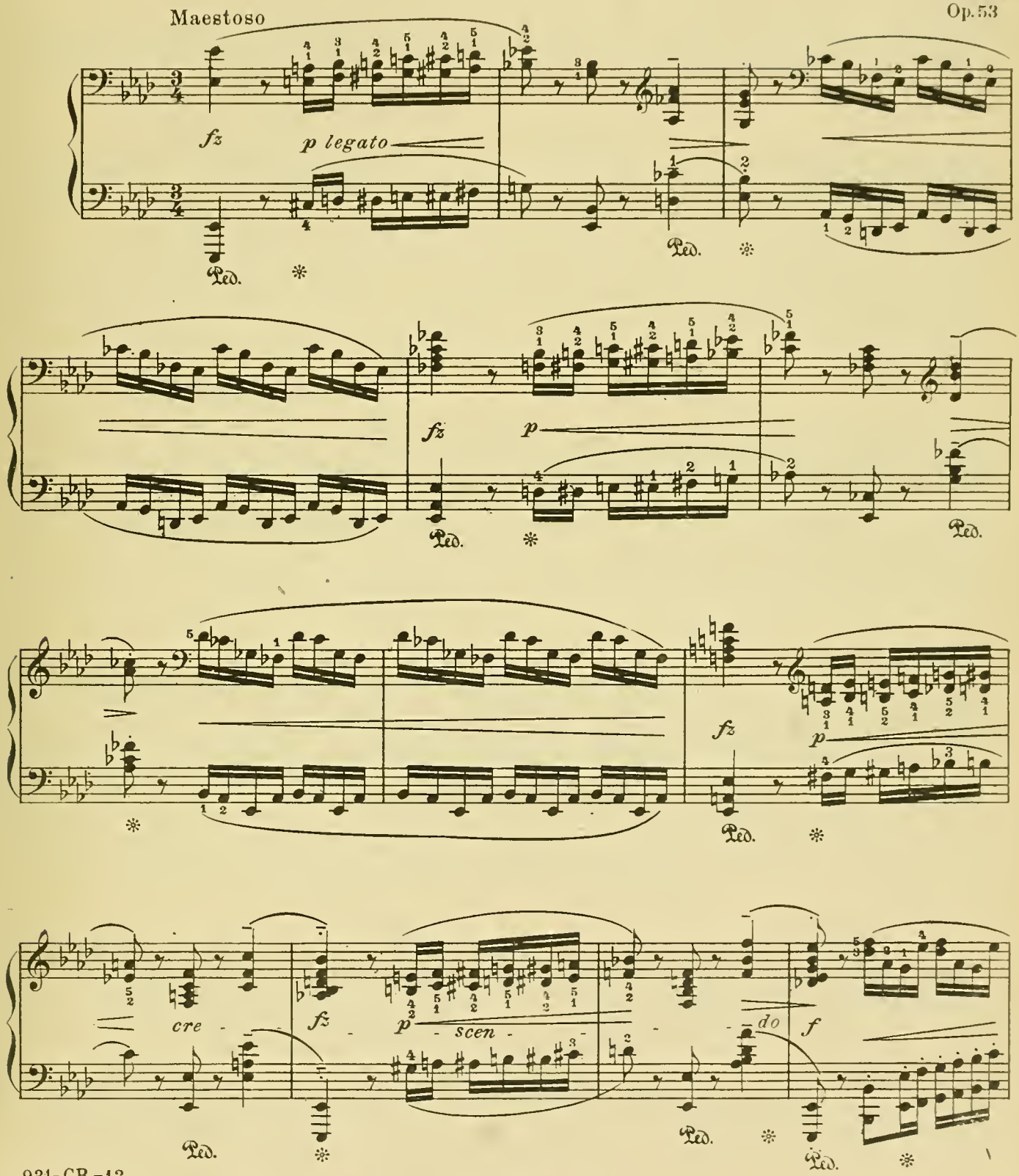
CHOPIN
Op. 53



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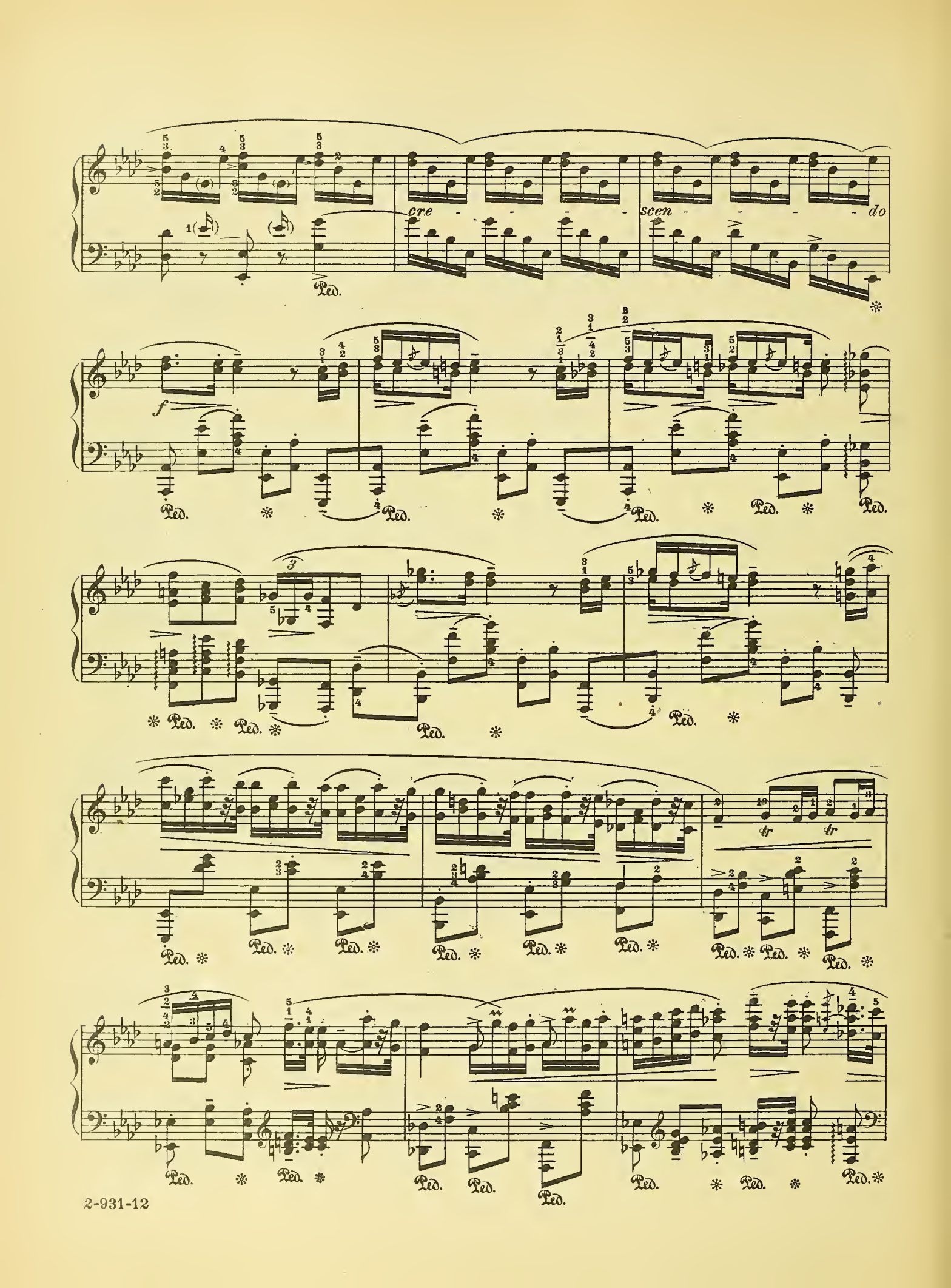
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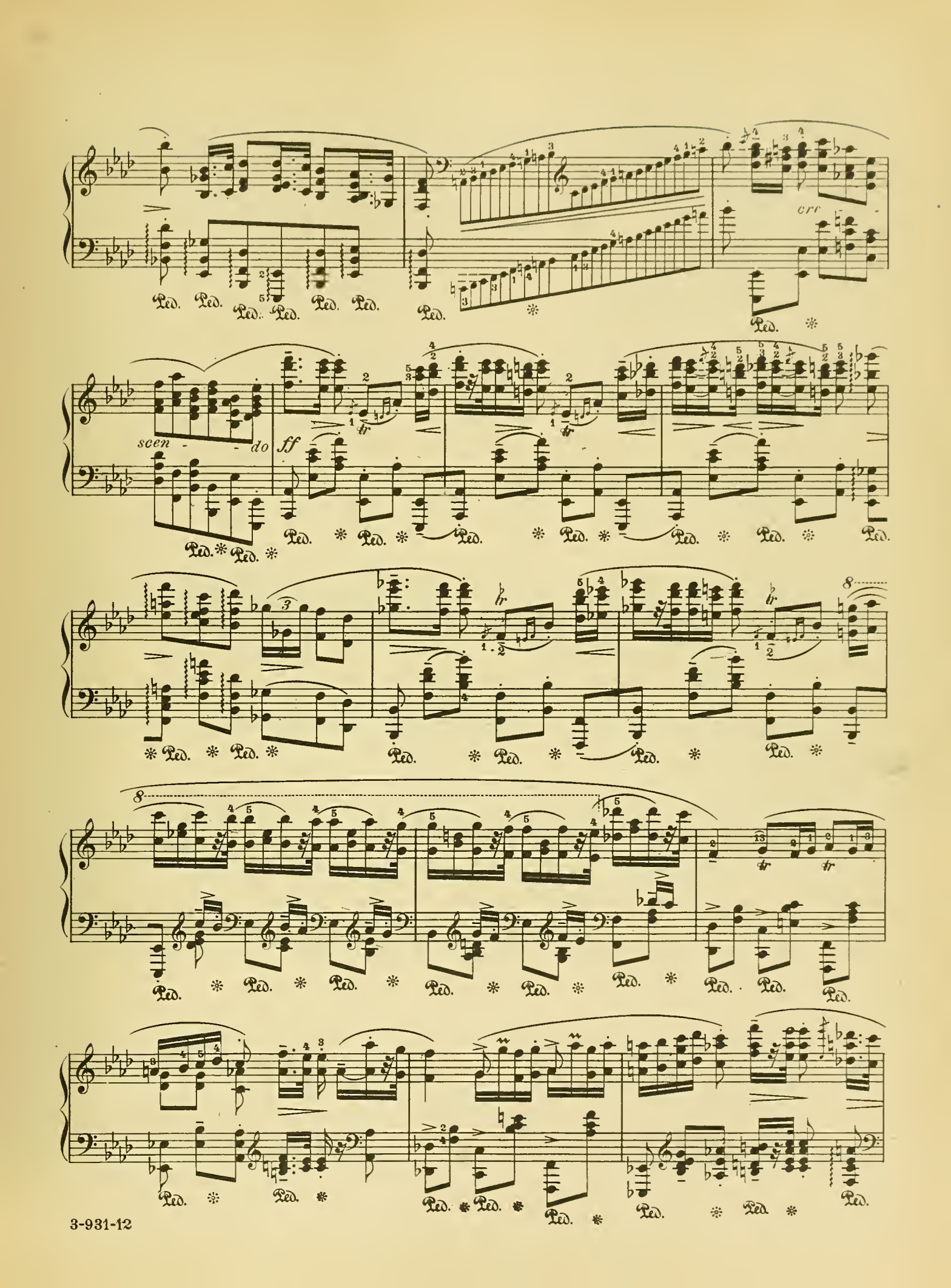
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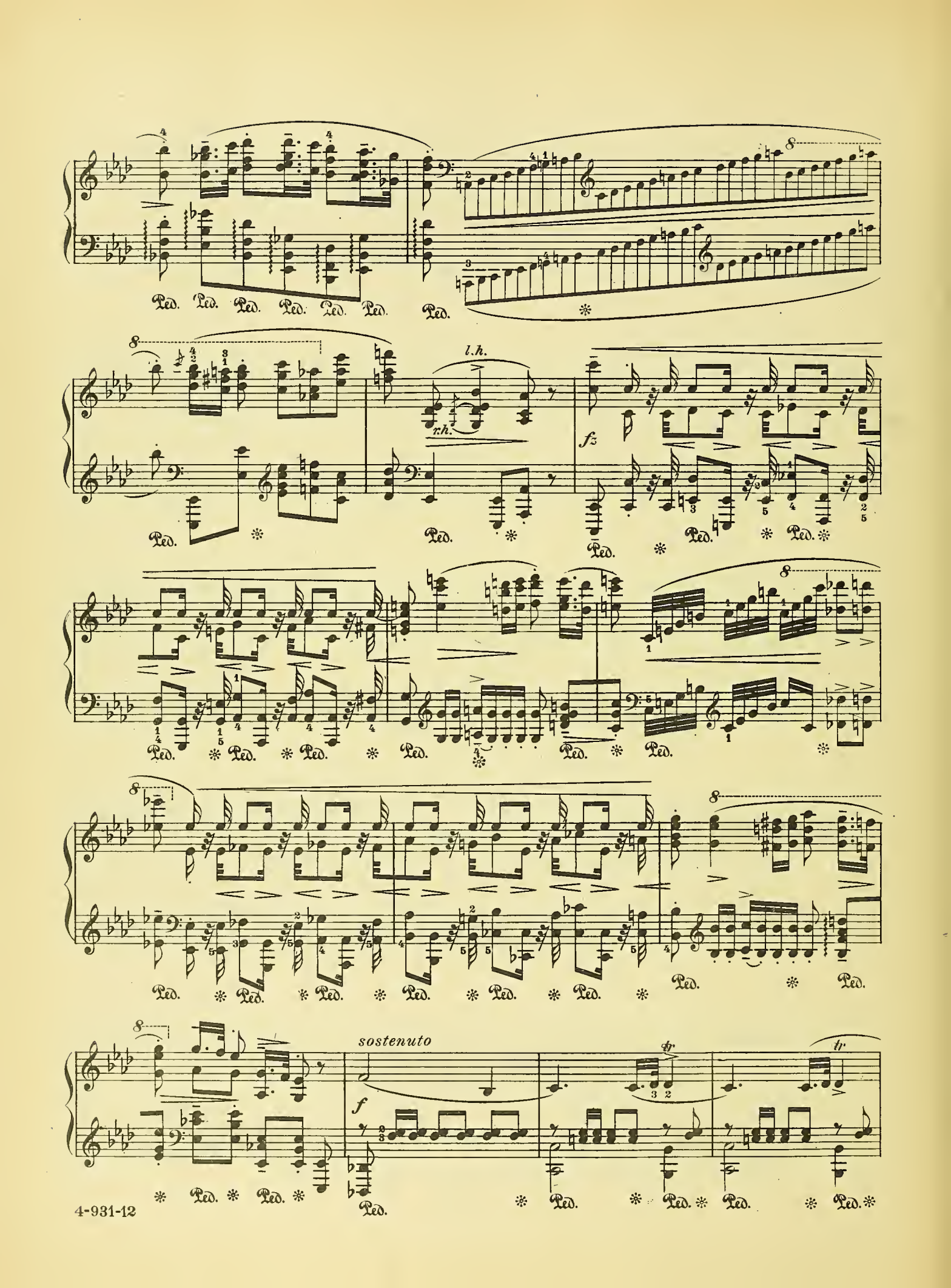
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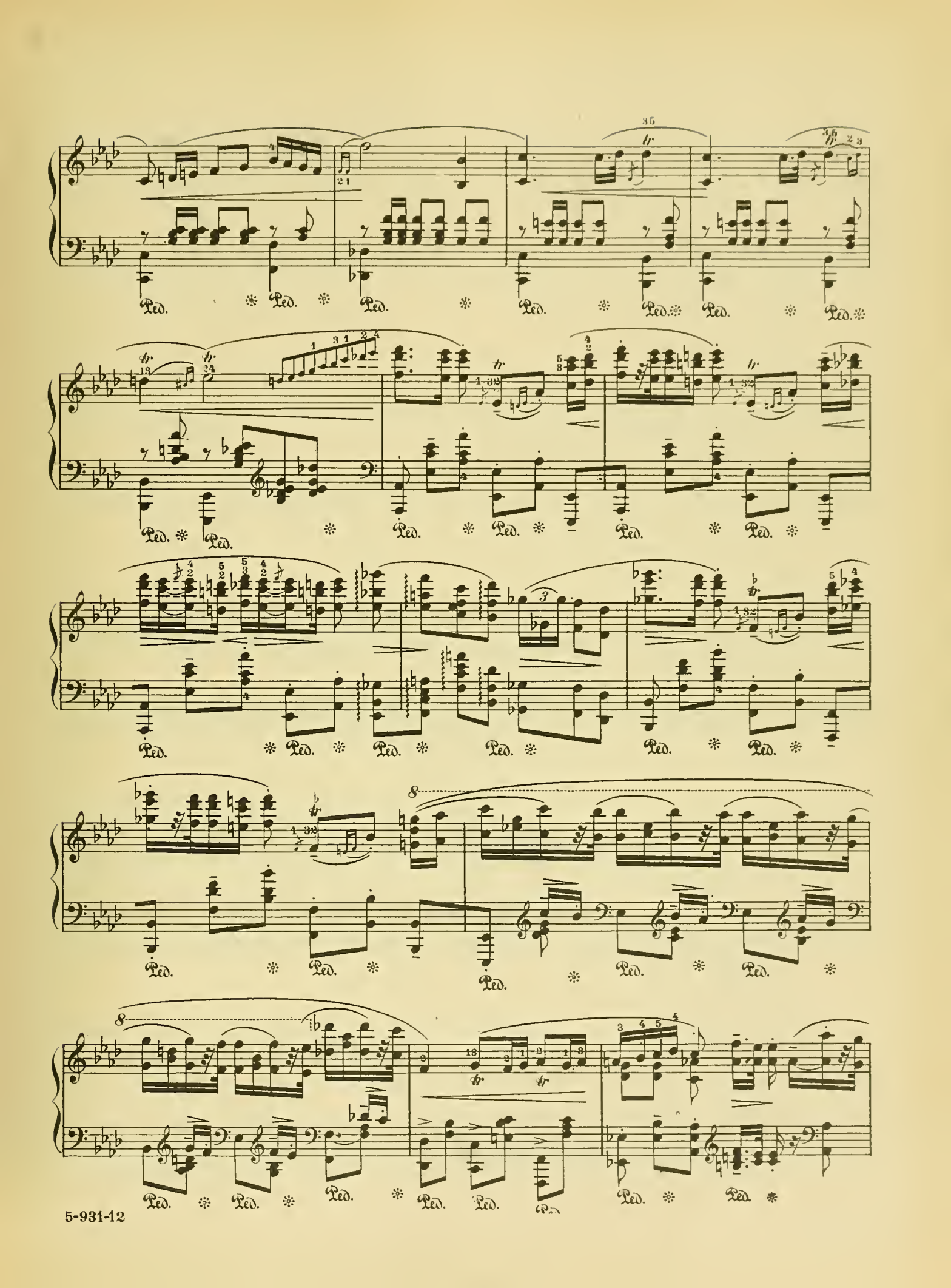
Ped.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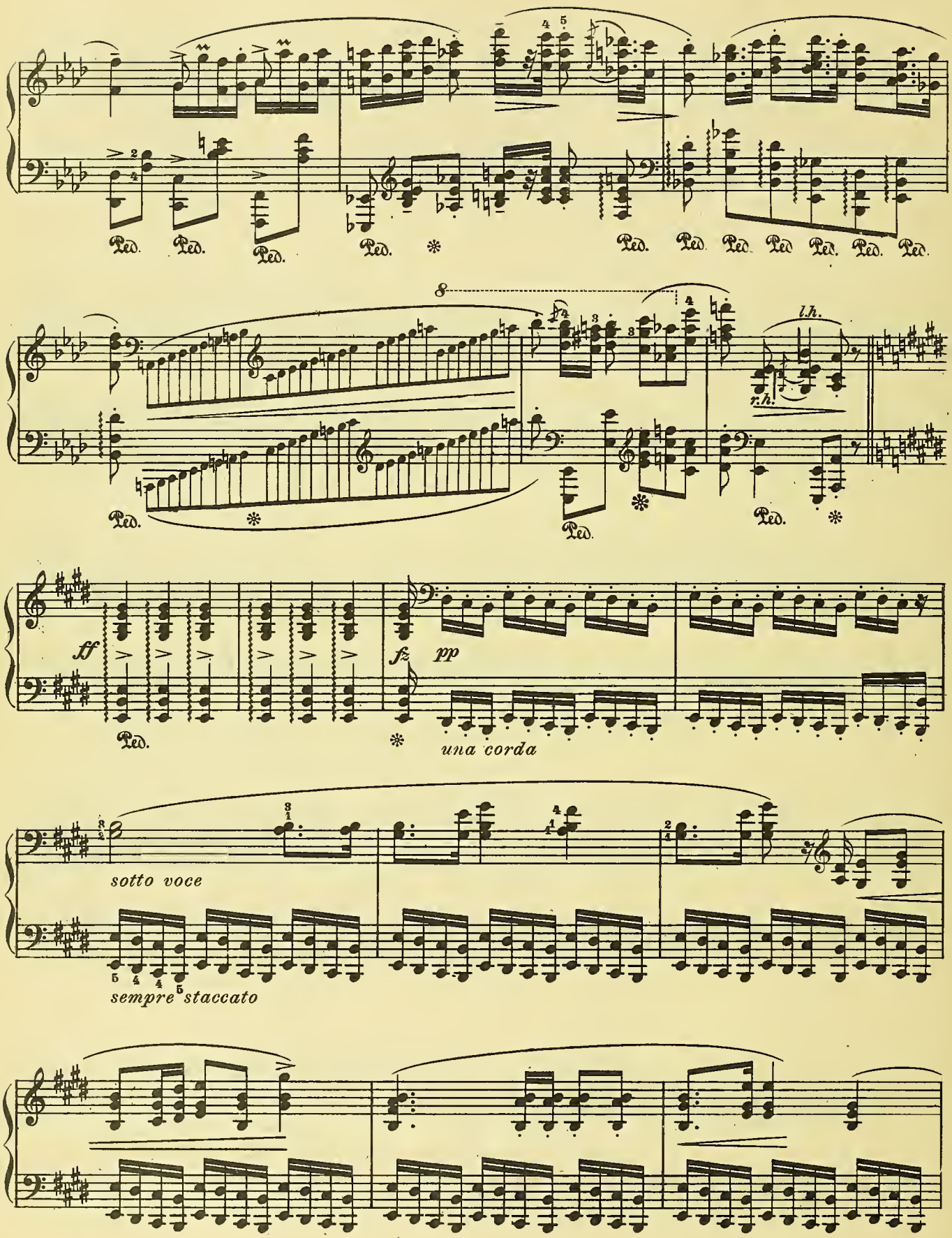
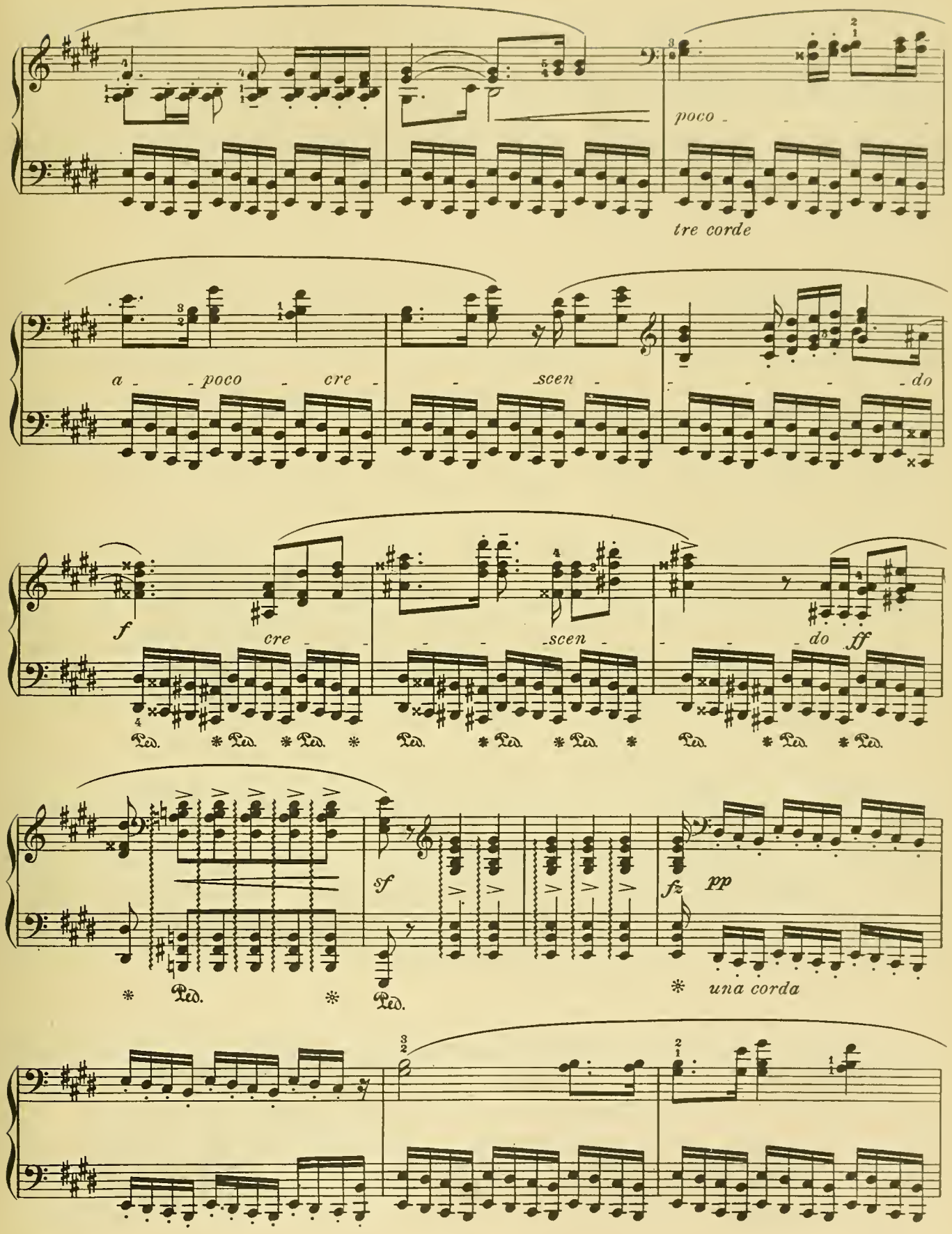

Ped.
8
l.h.
r.h.
ff
fz
pp
una corda
sotto voce
sempre staccato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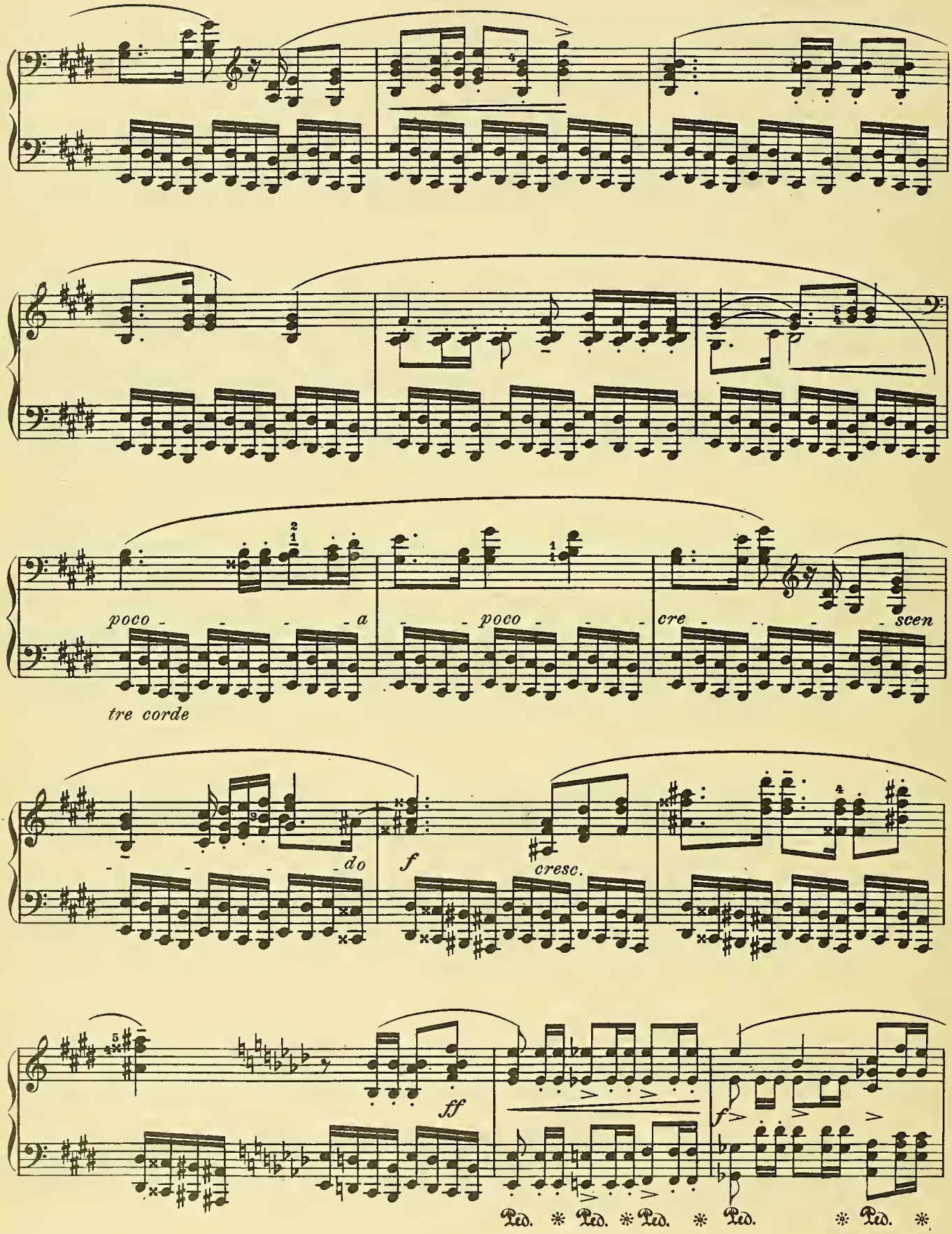
tre corde
a poco cre scen do
f
cre scen do
ff
Ped.
sf
fz
pp
una corda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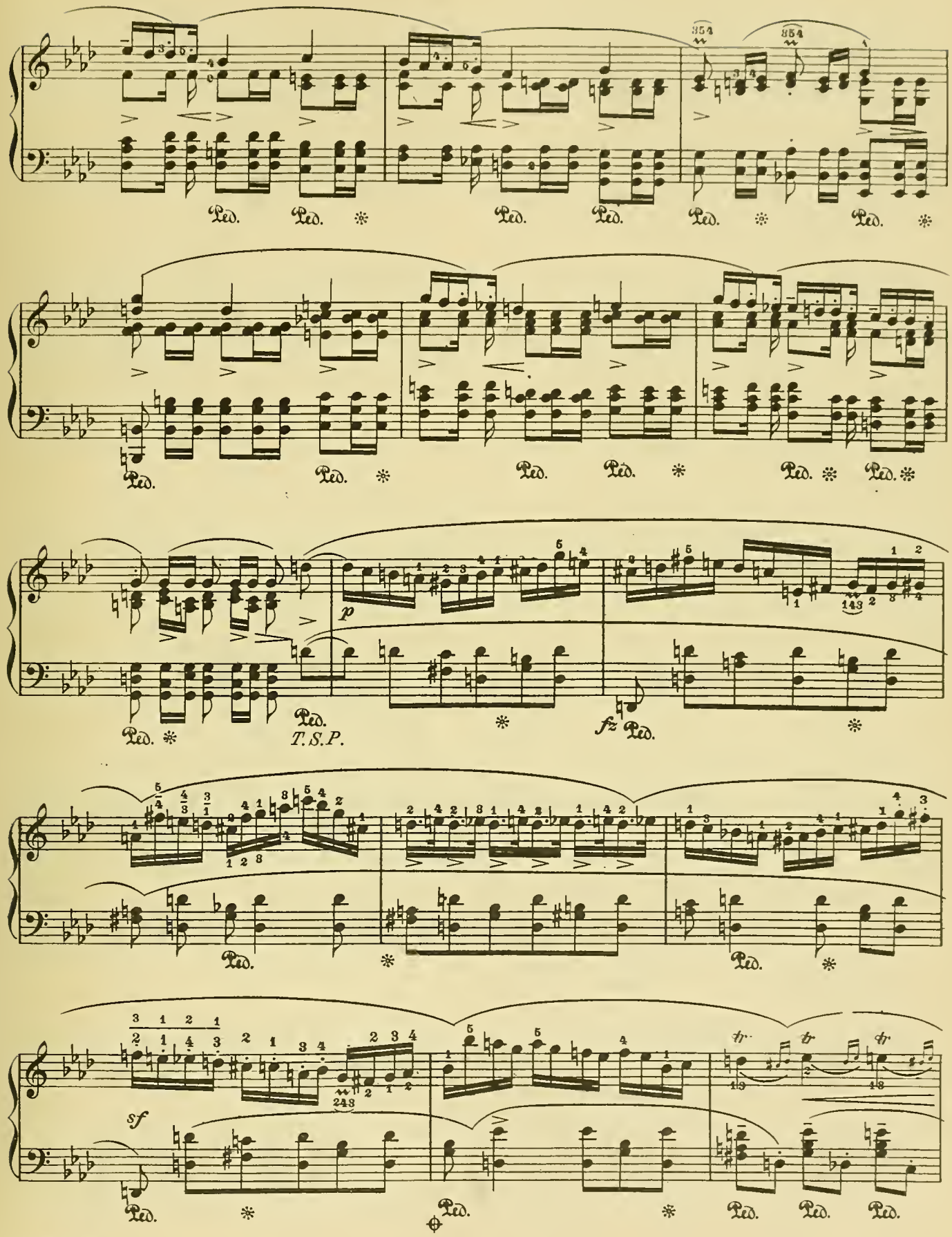
f
Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * Ped. *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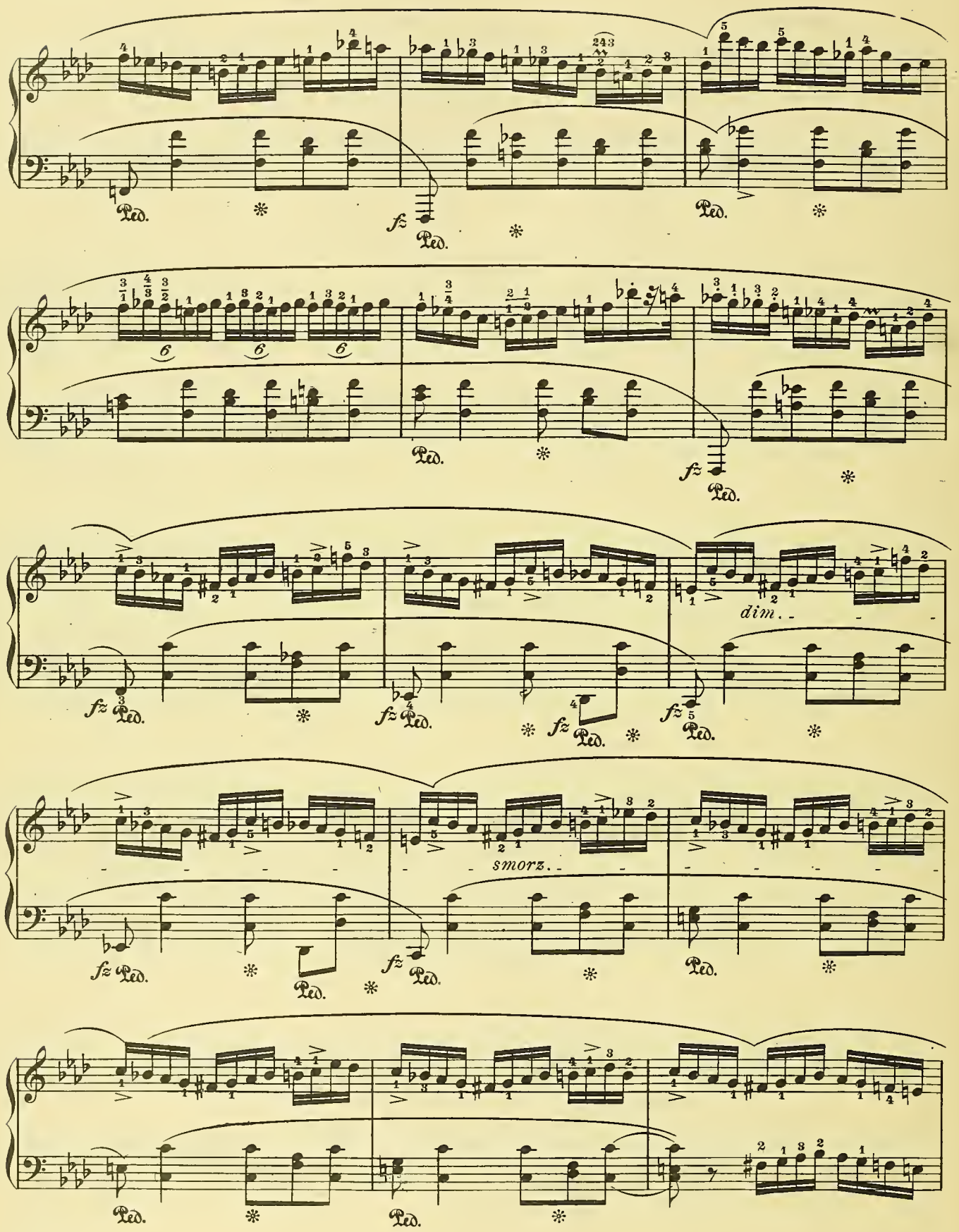
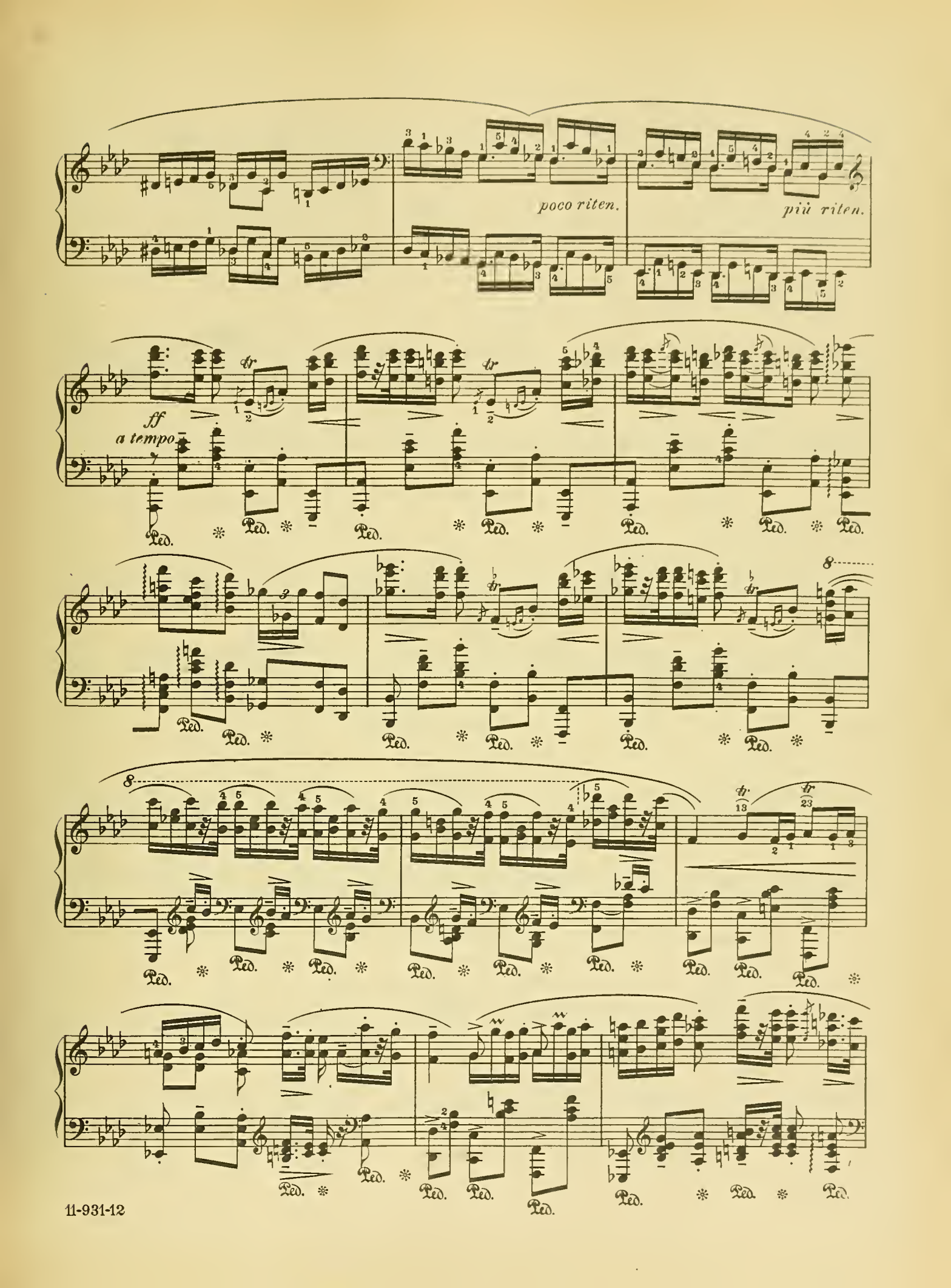
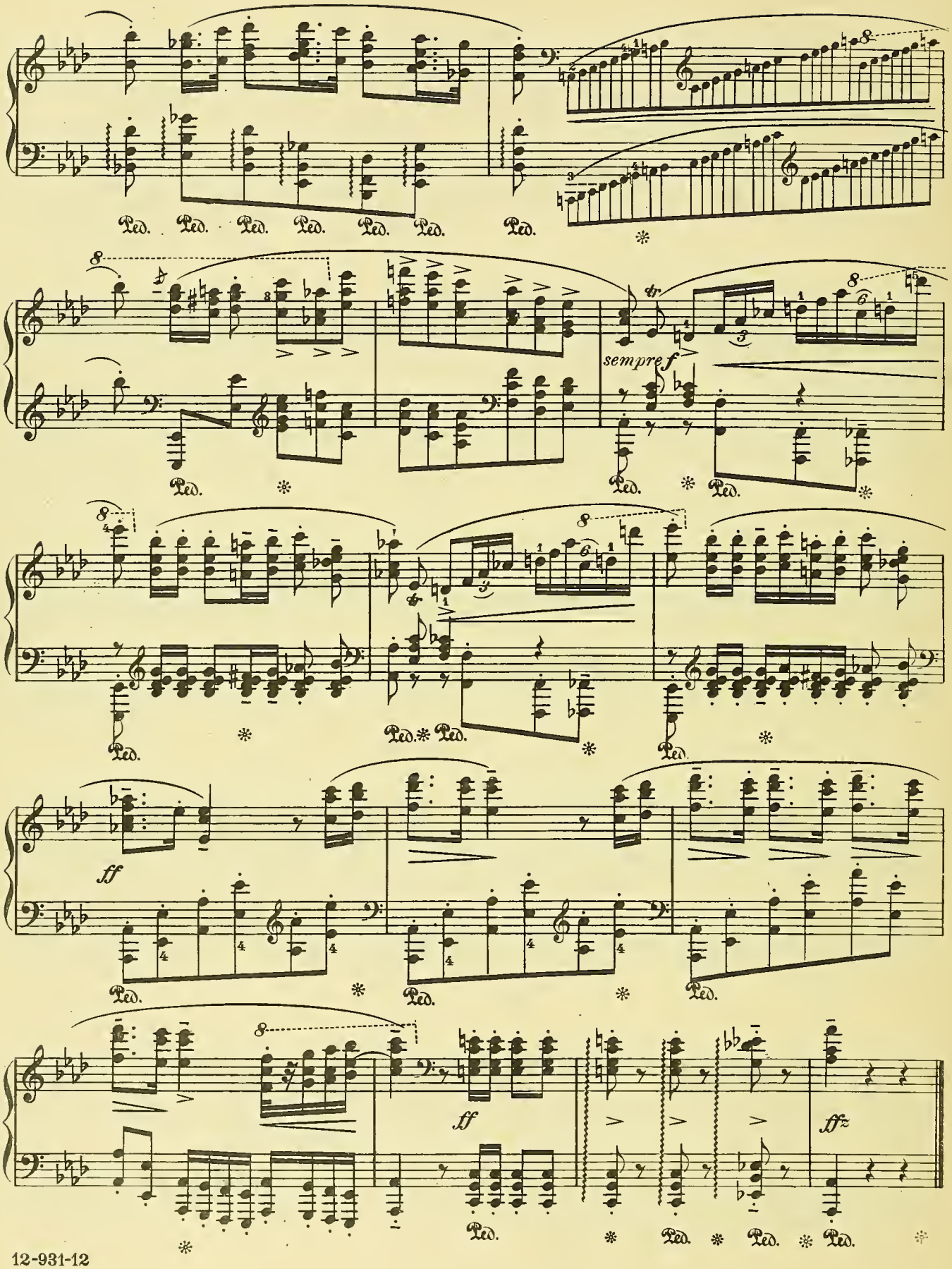

fz
Ped.
dim.
smorz.


poco riten.
più riten.
ff
a tempo
Ped.


Ped.
sempre f
ff
ffz

MEMORANDA

MEMORANDA

CHAPTER EXAMINATION

1. What is the origin of the Polonaise?

2. What was the effect of the music on Chopin while he was writing it?

3. Extreme endurance is required of what muscles? By what passages?

4. How should the octave passages for the left hand in the middle section be played?

5. By what names or terms may this particular Polonaise be distinguished from others by the same composer?

6. What is meant by the French term *plaqué?*

7. What criticism has been made as to the quiet theme in the middle group?

8. Give an outline of the form of this Polonaise.

9. Write some of the characteristic motives, from memory and in a different Key.

10. What national characteristics are evident in this work?

Student Percentage

Examined by Date

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